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# The Essex Scottish Regiment in Operation Atlantic

## What went wrong?

John Maker

Almost two years after its near-annihilation at Dieppe, the Essex Scottish Regiment returned to battle on 20 July 1944 at Verrières Ridge and was decimated for a second time. It had orders to seize an objective under hopeless conditions, lacked adequate support, and had an inexperienced brigadier, Hugh A. Young. What went wrong?

The commanding officer (CO), Lieutenant-Colonel B.J.S. MacDonald, could not convince his superior officer and the battalion's supporting armour to intervene at a crucial juncture. Young's failure to intervene cost the Essex Scots their reputation and self-confidence, their popular CO, and 244 of their men – dead, wounded, or missing. Second Canadian Corps lost an important position astride the strategic high ground south of Caen, and the Black Watch, which sought to restore the situation, suffered many casualties. The heavy losses at Verrières Ridge helped to give the Essex Scots the dubious distinction of suffering the most casualties of any Canadian regiment during the war. It is unlikely that any member of the regiment (or any other unit) could have saved the day, and the shabby treatment that MacDonald

**Abstract: On 20-21 July 1944 the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade was engaged in combat operations on Verrières Ridge south of Caen. Enemy resistance was stronger than expected and the Canadian attack was met by strong German counterattacks supported by armour. During the course of the battle, two units, the Essex Scottish Regiment and the South Saskatchewan Regiment were driven back. In the aftermath of the battle the Essex Scottish Regiment and their commanding officer were criticized for their poor performance. This article examines the battle in an attempt to understand who was to blame. Lieutenant-Colonel B.J.S MacDonald, the commanding officer of the Essex Scots, was fired for his role in the battle, but this article posits that Brigadier Hugh A. Young bears the greater share of responsibility for the operation's failure.**

received afterwards seems completely inappropriate.

A respected lawyer from Windsor, Ontario, Bruce John Stewart MacDonald had served as a militia officer in the Essex Scottish from 1929 to 1939, whereupon he volunteered for overseas service. He was a company commander and, after Dieppe, second-in-command of the battalion. During the reconstruction and retraining of the unit he had quickly developed a reputation as an excellent trainer and leader; his

men liked and respected him. In late 1942 he became chief instructor of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade Battle School, coordinating training at 4th Brigade HQ for company-, battalion-, and brigade-sized exercises and learning to command at senior levels.<sup>1</sup> When MacDonald took command in May 1943, Major Fred Tilston (later recipient of the Victoria Cross) commented in the battalion's war diary: "It is with great relief that the command is to be passed to an Essex Scot and to one such as Major MacDonald, who is well qualified to take over,...[with his] knowledge of training methods and his varied experience."<sup>2</sup>

MacDonald appears in the unit's war diary much more frequently than his predecessor, Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Mothersill. He organized both battalion and brigade training and increased parades and sub-unit inspections to improve discipline and pride of unit, which had faltered after Dieppe. By mid-1943 retraining was well under way.<sup>3</sup>

MacDonald "stressed the great responsibility that every officer has when he leads his men into battle."<sup>4</sup> He sought to ensure that all ranks could command even without higher



Photo courtesy of Hardy Wheeler, LCol (Ret'd), Regimental Archivist, Essex and Kent Scottish Regiment

**Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce MacDonald, commander of the Essex Scottish Regiment during the attack on Verrières Ridge, was removed from his position because he was seen as being nervous and not properly able to control his battalion during the battle.**

almost to Falaise, where the British army would eventually meet the Americans in August.

Operation Goodwood, the major British armoured attack to capture Verrières Ridge, had failed. By 19 July VIII British Corps had lost about 270 tanks and many men and was organizing its withdrawal. Although Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, commander of II Canadian Corps, assumed that these British attempts had softened up German resistance, the decision to attack the ridge with a "fresh infantry division" proved costly.<sup>8</sup> British pressure to break the German line and Montgomery's insistence that the advance continue forced Simonds' hand.

The 6th Brigade plan of attack involved four infantry battalions. The Cameron Highlanders of Canada would advance on the right flank against St. André-sur-Orne, where they would probably meet enemy armour; the South Saskatchewan Regiment would attack in the centre towards the crest of the ridge; and the Fusiliers de Mont-Royal (FMRs) would advance on the left flank towards Verrières, just below the ridge's summit.<sup>9</sup> The Essex Scots were to advance behind the South Sasks and set up a firm base behind the forward centre battalion and might leapfrog the South Sasks if the latter were able to consolidate on their objectives.

"A" Squadron of the 27th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Sherbrooke Fusiliers) was to support the attack on St. André-sur-Orne, "C" Squadron was to support the FMRs on the left, while "B" Squadron remained in reserve at regimental and brigade headquarters (HQ) near

authority, having "each [platoon] exercised in drill by the [officer], then by several [private] soldiers."<sup>5</sup> When the Essex Scots "boarded American vessels for the journey to France" on 4 July 1944<sup>6</sup> they could reasonably anticipate success in battle.

This article will examine the planning for the assault at Verrières Ridge, the attack itself, responses to Brigadier Young's report on the event, and the conflicting sources that make it difficult to understand what really happened.

### Planning the Assault

On the night of 19 July 1944, in Operation Atlantic, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division received

orders to carry 21 Army Group's advance southward from the southern outskirts of Caen and to establish itself on Verrières Ridge. The next day 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade moved forward with the Essex Scots under command for an advance on the ridge. The brigade commander was Brigadier H.A. Young, "an RMC graduate without previous combat experience."<sup>7</sup> The crest of Verrières runs roughly east-west and affords a commanding view both north and south. The German defenders could see clearly the Anglo-Canadian advance from the north. Tactically, capture of the ridge was crucial to II Canadian Corps' southward advance, as it would afford a view south across nearby Roqancourt and

**Brigadier Hugh A. Young commanded the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade during the 20 July 1944 attack on Verrières Ridge. Though he blamed the failure of the operation on his subordinates, the evidence makes it clear that he did not have a solid grip on the battle.**

Ifs.<sup>10</sup> "A" and "C" Squadrons were to direct fire from rearward, hull-down positions to support the flanks and deal with any enemy armour that appeared; "B" would act at the brigadier's discretion. Artillery was on call as needed. Sixth Brigade's orders termed the Sherbrookes "the basis of [the] counter-attack force."<sup>11</sup> The decision to limit armoured support in the centre would prove disastrous.

HQs of both 2nd Division and 6th Brigade underestimated the German forces facing the attackers. According to 6th Brigade's war diary, the "presumption was that the opposition on our front was not great and that quick offensive action should break through readily the enemy screen."<sup>12</sup> Messages from 2nd Division to 6th Brigade portray the German 272nd Infantry Division, which held the front along the line Verrières-Fontenay-le-Marmion-St. André-sur-Orne, as inferior to the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions, which intelligence suggested the 272nd had recently relieved on both sides of the Orne.<sup>13</sup> "As late as 14 July this lower-grade [division] reported on its way from the south of France."<sup>14</sup> The 272nd soon showed itself capable of fierce fighting, and, as quickly became clear, it had support from armoured battlegroups of the 1st SS and 2nd Panzer Divisions.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Attack on Verrières Ridge, 20-21 July 1944**

**T**hat long 20 July began at 0115 hours when the Essex Scots, on little sleep and no food, were ordered to prepare to move. Their advance began at 0800 hours, and, once they



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reached the 6th Brigade area, they received "a poor breakfast and little or no noon meal."<sup>16</sup> According to 6th Brigade, they were not at their forming-up point (FUP) until 1300 hours, two hours before the attack.<sup>17</sup> The regiment's war diary indicates arrival at the FUP and the start of digging in at 1130 hours and completion by 1300 hours; it maintains that the enemy began shelling the FUP at 1300 hours.

The artillery barrage began at 1435 hours and 25 minutes later the three battalions of 6th Brigade crossed the start-line.<sup>18</sup> "It was a spectacular sight seeing this advance over a front of some 4000 yards."<sup>19</sup> All three units reported "FOREST" as they reached the intermediate report line. However,

the South Sasks were ambushed by infantry of the German 272nd and lost the barrage. The Germans had cannily held fire for days, convincing British army intelligence that this sector was unoccupied. The South Sasks attempted to sustain forward momentum: "B Coy had pushed through D Coy at the double to catch up to our barrage...shortly after A Coy on our left encountered the first of many enemy posts."<sup>20</sup>

Despite ferocious German resistance, elements of the South Sasks reached their objective. The sources disagree, however, about how quickly they reached their final objective. The post-battle entry in 6th Brigade's war diary states that by 1700 hours the South Sasks reported



two companies on their objective.<sup>21</sup> According to the day's operations log, however, at 1650 hours the Sasks were still 200 yards from the objective, and "A" Company did not radio success until 1725 hours. At 1732 hours "D" Company also reported success. The Camerons sent back their codeword, MAPLE, at 1650 hours. Sixth Brigade's war diary stated: "the situation on the front of these two [battalions] was very satisfactory, consequently at about 1730 hours the Essex Scot were ordered to move to their [position] with all possible speed."<sup>22</sup>

According to the log, the Essex Scots were ordered forward at 1727 hours, a mere two minutes after the South Sasks' leading elements had reported POPLAR and *before* their "D" Company reached the objective. Therefore the brigade war diary's account, with the South Sasks reaching their objective and consolidating for a half-hour, allowing Brigadier Young time to assess the situation before he ordered the Essex forward, seems erroneous. Young ordered the Essex to advance only as the Sasks were reaching their objective. The two-minute interim did not permit proper analysis of the situation. It appears that brigade HQ could have known only that the Sasks' "A" Company had arrived at the objective. Had Young waited a half-hour he would have seen the situation deteriorate: 18 minutes after the two forward companies arrived 6th Brigade heard from the Sasks only that "We are being attacked by tanks."<sup>23</sup>

The enemy "started to lay down heavy mortar and artillery fire accurately fired onto [the Sasks'] positions."<sup>24</sup> At that point the first enemy tanks appeared, knocking out some of the battalion's anti-tank guns and firing on the exposed infantry. One Sask officer, Major John Edmondson, commander of "B" Company, recalled, "One tank came right into my left forward

platoon driving right over top of people it didn't shoot."<sup>25</sup> As the German counterattack intensified, the Saskatchewan infantry went to ground in the waist-high grass, which hid it from the panzers, who could now traverse the ridge at will and fire on anything that moved. The enemy's continuing mortar fire inflicted further



casualties; acting CO Major G.R. Matthews – already wounded and furiously sending support requests to brigade – and battalion Intelligence Officer Lieutenant D.S. Pedlow both "received an almost direct hit" in the battalion HQ carrier vehicle, which also knocked out communications.<sup>26</sup>

The beginning of a heavy rainstorm further complicated communication and observation, but consolidation continued. "The 6-pounders, mortars, carrier and pioneer platoons were ordered forward to help prepare a battalion 'fortress' but these also came under attack from infantry and armour appearing over the ridge from the southwest at 1750 hours."<sup>27</sup> The battalion war diary reported that "The tanks attacked "D" Company with HE [high explosive] and MG [machine gun] fire."<sup>28</sup> Then an enemy counterattack from the southeast overran "B" Company and destroyed the remaining anti-tank guns that were moving to their consolidation positions. "The tanks came right up to the crest of the hill and started to lay down [heavy] HE and MG

fire causing heavy casualties."<sup>29</sup> In the face of such overwhelming firepower, some officers ordered the exposed infantry to withdraw to the cover of the waist-high grain. Then "the tanks, once they had no easy targets, sprayed the wheat fields with machine gun fire and turned circles through the wheat in an effort to crush the men or flush them into the open so they could be fired upon."<sup>30</sup>

According to 6th Brigade's operations log, the South Sasks urgently requested assistance at 1750 hours and again five minutes later: "We are being attacked by tanks. We need help from the tank counter attack coming from the SOUTH."<sup>31</sup> This was the last message received from the beleaguered battalion for the next two hours, presumably because of the destruction of the HQ carrier vehicle, along with the loss of the acting CO. When the Sasks finally were in touch again, they reported enemy shelling and further casualties.<sup>32</sup> Requests for assistance started arriving 23 minutes after the lead South Sask elements reached the objective, but before the Essex had reached its consolidation position. The Essex's orders entailed forming a firm base for the South Sasks, which necessitated time to *create* a firm base before the Germans counterattacked the Sasks and forced them back.

The Essex Scots started moving at 1727 hours. They reported reaching their objective and starting to dig in at 1820 hours, a half-hour after the start of the German counterattack which had decimated the Sasks in plain sight, just several hundred yards forward.<sup>33</sup> During the counterattack, one of the Sasks' two surviving senior officers, Major L.L. Dickin, went back to inform Essex CO MacDonald that the Sasks could not survive on the objective they had so recently occupied. As a result, they would retire behind the forward Essex positions which were not yet fully consolidated. Dickin and Edmondson then went



to inform Young of the situation in hopes of receiving armoured or artillery support. Underestimating the opposition, Young gave orders to hold the position on the slopes of the ridge and offered no armoured support.

Returning to the unit, Dickin and Edmondson found remnants of the South Sasks withdrawing through the Essex forward positions back to their FUP.<sup>34</sup> Some stayed on the slopes to assist the Essex Scots, but the unopposed Panzers again pinned them to the ground. Many of the Sasks who had fallen back were wounded or withdrawing to more defensible positions. Staying up front would almost certainly have spelled annihilation, and the

company commanders' decision to withdraw doubtless saved lives.

According to the South Sasks' war diary and 6th Brigade's operations log, the battalion's companies were in retreat *before* the Essex Scots had reached their objective:

The remainder of "B" [Company] then withdrew through the grain field through "C" [Company] area. Major J.S. Edmondson then reported the [position] of the line of the forward troops to [Brigade Command Post] at Ifs. The Essex Scottish who were in reserve, then came forward and started to dig in...the remainder of the S Sask R then withdrew through the Essex Scottish, with the exception of some of the boys.<sup>35</sup>

Even though many South Sasks remained with the Essex Scots to help mount a defence large numbers of Sasks continued to withdraw directly through the Essex positions.

The forward Essex companies, now struck by tanks and artillery, began to withdraw. Verbal reports began to come in that elements of "A" and "B" Companies were coming back.<sup>36</sup> The Essex reported to 6th Brigade: "[Tanks] south of the [crossroads]."<sup>37</sup> Then, more ominous, "There are two tanks in front of our "D" [Company], We need [anti-tank support] immediately."<sup>38</sup> "D" Company was one of the reserve Essex companies, and this message suggests that the forward companies had already been turned back and urgently needed artillery, armour, or anti-tank weapons. What could the unsupported and exposed South Sasks and Essex Scots do against strongly-entrenched enemy troops, panzers and a constant shower of mortar and artillery shells?

The tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers' "A" and "C" Squadrons did little to address the centre battalions' predicament. "C" Squadron reported efforts to reach a good firing position near Beauvoir Farm, but "things became too hot," so it withdrew.<sup>39</sup> Sergeant Olivier of "C" Squadron, in a Firefly tank, maintained that as he took up a position on the high ground overlooking St. André in support of the Camerons he observed three panzers near Verrières village and fired on them. The rain and smoke prevented him from seeing whether he scored any hits. He *did* notice the Panzers returning fire, so he moved his tank behind a hill under cover of smoke.<sup>40</sup> His fire appears to be one of the few significant instances

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**Sherman tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers were positioned behind Verrières Ridge but Brigadier Young never gave the order to commit them to battle.**

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### Canadian infantry on the move south of Caen.

of support near the centre all day. Although 6th Brigade's pre-attack plan designated "B" Squadron as a counterattack force, no such move ever occurred, or was ordered. The reserve squadron moved out only to reinforce success on the right, behind the Camerons.

Meanwhile, back on the ridge, the Essex's "A" and "B" Companies had begun to withdraw, not necessarily out of control as Brigadier Young and some historians have since suggested. According to MacDonald and Captain D.W. McIntyre ("B" Company commander), the men had been unable to consolidate because they had been ordered forward during a counterattack and the enemy had directed all kinds of fire on them. McIntyre consulted with the "A" Company commander and they jointly decided to withdraw, chiefly because they were being attacked by mortar, machine gun and tank fire, and had lost communication with battalion HQ.

Edmondson perhaps observed this party as he set off to report to Young:

When we set off, I noticed small figures far down the slope in front

of the St. André crossroads stand up and converge for a moment as if to consult and then double to the rear. Some of the forward elements of the Essex Scottish were withdrawing. To me they were in a precarious position and had to seek cover from the intense enemy fire.<sup>41</sup>

MacDonald ordered McIntyre to gather up his men and dig them in behind "D" Company. Only a portion of "B" Company dug in. The rest of "B" had, on McIntyre's orders, returned to the FUP to evacuate casualties. That these men later appeared in the rear does not prove that "B" Company retreated in panic.<sup>42</sup> "The B Company withdrawal appears to have been well handled and controlled otherwise."<sup>43</sup> MacDonald later admitted, however, that "A" Company, having lost all of its officers and most non-commissioned officers (NCOs), retreated in some disorder. Clearly only parts of the Essex forward companies actually "broke" and "collapsed," while the remainder withdrew in an orderly and controlled manner.

MacDonald attempted to keep control of his battalion by ordering the lead (now retreating) companies

to halt and dig in behind the reserve Essex companies, which then became the forward units. At 2000 hours he toured these companies and tried to settle his justifiably unnerved men. The CO claims that he,

talked to nearly every man. I satisfied myself with the positions held, the forward ones...I told the men they were now the forward companies and must hold on at all cost. Some were shaken a bit by the S Sask R and A and B Coy withdrawals, but seemed reassured and steadied by my visit."<sup>44</sup>

As MacDonald ordered, these two companies held their ground just short of their assigned objective. They did not allow further enemy penetration that night, despite constant shelling.

MacDonald returned to the FUP near Ifs to see if he could arrange food and hot drinks for his men in the forward areas and to find the men from "A" and "B" who had withdrawn. While en route he learned from Young that 100 Essex Scots were at the FUP. MacDonald was surprised at that number but he understood that "A" and "B" Companies had



suffered many casualties and that McIntyre had detailed about 30 men to evacuate the wounded. Presumably many of those in the rear were walking wounded and so might appear to Young to be improperly out of battle.

MacDonald found about 50 men at the FUP.<sup>45</sup> Sometime after 2100 hours, according to MacIntyre, "The C.O....ordered me to get in his carrier and go to the rear and pick up my thirty men who had been evacuating casualties and collect the remnants of "A" Company who had previously been withdrawn and were without an officer."<sup>46</sup>

At the FUP, MacDonald marched the men he found to brigade HQ to refit them for battle and supply ammunition. According to him, brigade was unable to replenish the men, so he ordered them to stay in the rear, have a good meal and a decent night's sleep, and be ready to return to the line in the morning, once

brigade HQ had ammunition. Young appears to have again encountered these men and went to division to acquire ammunition and weapons for them. The men received new supplies at 0400 hours, complete with orders from both MacDonald and Young to return to the line. Lieutenant A. McCrimmon, previously left out of battle, led about 14 men to the front at 0300 hours, reorganized "A" Company, and took command.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, the Essex forward companies spent the night in their wet slit trenches and kept watch on the blood-soaked slopes in front of them. During the night rain, mud, and non-stop mortaring had made many weapons unusable. "The men worked continuously on their [weapons], even tearing off their shirts for rags in a futile attempt to keep them in order."<sup>48</sup>

At first light, eight enemy tanks were loitering around "C" Company's area, with infantry and snipers in

tow.<sup>49</sup> German tanks and infantry maintained constant machine gun and small arms fire. MacDonald returned to Ifs, as he had received orders at 0930 hours to meet with the brigadier and apparently intended to request armoured support. When he arrived Young was absent, so he decided to acquire such support by himself. The tanks in "C" Company's area, he reported, "were so positioned that our [anti-tank] guns and PIATs could not get at them. There were many of our own tanks in the vicinity, but they did not appear to be taking any action. I asked one tank commander personally for help, but he flatly refused."<sup>50</sup>

Back in "C" Company's sector, the enemy had moved into position in the dark for an armoured counterattack on the morning of 21 July. The reinforced enemy again struck at the weakest point in the line, the 6th Brigade's shaken centre held by the harried Essex Scots. The enemy

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**Knocked out tanks remain on Verrières Ridge after the battle. The open nature of the terrain is apparent from this photograph.**

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tanks started harassing the forward troops at about 0900 hours, and the attack continued throughout the morning as more enemy troops and tanks arrived. The barrage cut off "C" Company, No.17 Platoon and battalion HQ from the rest of the unit. Many men were captured, with the Germans marching them into captivity.<sup>51</sup>

Some men started withdrawing in the face of the continued German attacks. Further, those from "A" and "B" Companies with orders to return to the front remained at the FUP. Young ordered MacDonald to intercept the men who were coming out and re-form them on an intermediate position. At about 1100 hours he also told MacDonald to take the men from "A" and "B" Companies with him to start digging in on the intermediate position, which surprised MacDonald, who had thought these men already at the front, as per his orders. Although some Essex Scots were moving rearward as a result of the German pressure, "elements of two [companies] were still in the forward area,"<sup>52</sup> and the battalion continued to hold the line.

As ordered, the Essex CO formed the battalion on the intermediate position and passed word through to the forward companies to withdraw to that point. The German counterattack, along with the Essex withdrawal, created a salient between the Camerons on the right and the FMRs on the left. The Essex held its new position and received orders to secure and prepare a start-line for the Black Watch, which was to attack through the Essex in order to reoccupy the forward positions that the Essex had occupied the previous night. At 1800 hours the Black Watch counterattacked the Germans (this time with armoured support) and recaptured the "lost" ground, thereby stabilizing the front. The Essex

remained in its intermediate position until 2200 hours, when it was relieved by the Royal Regiment of Canada.

## Responses to Young's Report

Brigadier Young's report on the operation blamed the retreat and casualties on Lieutenant-Colonel MacDonald's failure to control his men, his nervousness and seeming breakdown, his unsuitability for command, and the men's resulting lack of confidence in him. But Young himself acted questionably during and especially after the battle. His attack plan was flawed, and the battalion COs knew it. However, Foulkes and Simonds agreed with Young's conclusions and relieved MacDonald of command.

MacDonald very strongly protested the adverse report and cited five reasons why the attack failed. First, there was a lack of communication from the outset, unexpected and overpowering enemy action and bad weather. Second, both the South Sasks and the two forward Essex companies had to withdraw in the face of heavy enemy armoured counterattacks. Third, these enemy assaults caused many casualties. Fourth, according to MacDonald, a series of contradictory orders from Young made absolute compliance next to impossible. Fifth, the brigadier refused to permit the men from "A" and "B" Companies whom he found at his command post to return to battle, despite MacDonald's orders.<sup>53</sup>

Following his dismissal, MacDonald asked his company commanders to determine whether the other ranks indeed lacked confidence in him. The entire battalion, apparently without his urging, signed a petition in support of him.<sup>54</sup> Many of the men approached him and reassured him of their continuing

confidence and stated "their feeling that I have been unjustly punished for something I could not help."<sup>55</sup>

The Essex war diarist, Fred Tilston, had written on 22 July:

It is not a pleasant picture to realize that so many of the [battalion] have been lost, especially when the action was not successful and many of the casualties could have been avoided by better planning and the observance of the procedure that our [training] had led us to believe would be followed before going into battle. All of the rules of man management were either violated or ignored, by the sudden move ordered after midnight, the loss of sleep by all ranks, a poor breakfast and little or no noon meal before battle, and the general or detailed picture and plan, if known, was not given to the junior [officers] or troops.<sup>56</sup>

Higher command, of course, had ordered the untimely moves, botched "man management," and failed to pass on crucial intelligence. MacDonald commented that "psychologically everything was wrong and as far from what might have been imagined as the proper preparation for their first battle."<sup>57</sup>

MacDonald had little faith in Young's plan: "insofar as inspiring confidence is concerned I must admit that I lacked confidence in the [brigadier's] plan, which did fail to a large extent."<sup>58</sup> Officers of the South Sasks echoed MacDonald's misgivings. Lieutenant-Colonel Clift, temporarily replacing Brigadier Lett of 4th Brigade, stressed the need for armoured support. "I had asked, and was granted, a tank squadron in direct support, because of the long assault, the rising ground at the objective, and the chances of a quick tank cum infantry attack by the enemy."<sup>59</sup> However, on 19 July,

the acting CO, Major Matthews, had informed his officers that there would be no supporting armour. "The only support we could count on was indirect support of the Armour."<sup>60</sup> Young's removal of tanks was confirmed in 6th Brigade's final orders.<sup>61</sup>

Young had accused MacDonald of being nervous and uncontrolled. MacDonald claims that after arriving at brigade HQ as summoned at 0930 hours, he awaited the brigadier until 1100 hours. During this time, the Essex Scots were under attack and needed their CO, yet he waited for Young to return. MacDonald had:

no food for a day and a half, practically no sleep for two nights and had been soaked to the skin with water and mud for 5 or 6 hrs, and was consequently thoroughly chilled and cold. I was indignant at the lack of tank support, the casualties from artillery fire, the lack of food and drink, the men from A and B coys who still had not reported, and concerned about the fighting condition of our weapons. I felt that unless something could be done, we would have difficulty in resisting any determined counterattack... [Brigadier Young] was apparently not suffering from any of these physical discomforts or worries and was very composed. He refused to see that anything was wrong, or that I had any basis for my complaint and misgivings respecting support. It seemed sufficient to him that we had an armoured regiment standing around in the hills, whether they did anything to help us or not, while the Panthers harassed us at will with 88mm and MMG fire, and obviously intended to support an attack on our position... My feelings were less nervous than frustration and suppressed anger at his impatient attitude toward me and my inability to move him.<sup>62</sup>

MacDonald doubtless appeared anxious and annoyed, but he and the South Sask officers had good reason to be so. Every one of the commanding officers who went to see Young for help was excited, which the inexperienced brigadier interpreted as nervousness and hysteria, instead of a reasonable reaction to a desperate situation. In his post-battle letters to Foulkes and Simonds, MacDonald states that Young was unduly impatient with him. John Edmondson, acting CO of the South Sasks, also recounted the brigadier's impatience and annoyance. The South Sask major describes brigade HQ that day as "in a state of confusion because they didn't know what was going on. They seemed to change their mind from moment to moment.... the Brigade Commander offered no help to alleviate the immediate desperate situation."<sup>63</sup> Later, when Lieutenant-Colonel Gauvreau of the FMRs arrived to report the situation on the left flank, Young remarked that he was "somewhat excited."<sup>64</sup> It is clear that Young was unduly impatient with his battalion commanders in that he told Edmondson to calm down, and then accused MacDonald of losing control, subsequently claiming that he was not fit to command. However, the tactical shortcomings exposed in this attack were not MacDonald's or Edmondson's, but Young's.

### Conflicting Sources

Operations logs, war diaries, and a formal inquiry offer a wealth of conflicting information about the assault on Verrières Ridge. The operations logs recorded events as they happened, the war diarist wrote his piece *after* the battle, and the Court of Enquiry in the Field gathered verbal testimony under oath. C.P. Stacey ranks the operations log as the most reliable source by far:

Here the historian has before him the record of information received and sent out, of orders given and received. Every entry is timed. The record is strictly contemporary; it is almost wholly impersonal; and it is maintained, not for historical purposes, as the unit or formation war diary is, but as an instrument for fighting the battle... If a division's log is available, you can write the history of that division's part in the fight with confidence; if it is missing, you are hamstrung.<sup>65</sup>

Young undoubtedly read and approved the brigade war diary prior to its filing and even added some sections himself, yet it does not correspond with other evidence. The war diary maintains that, as a result of the South Sasks' second call for help, the reserve squadron of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, as well as an additional troop from "A" Squadron near St. André, was "ordered across" to help the Sasks.<sup>66</sup> However, the Sherbrooke Fusiliers' war diary and the ops log make no mention of any such orders. Additionally, Sherbrooke after-action reports never mention moving out in support of the centre; certainly the South Sasks and the Essex Scots never saw tanks in close support. Furthermore, there are numerous timing inconsistencies between the 6th Brigade's operations log and its war diary. The war diary paints an orderly picture of the advance in which brigade HQ took a half-hour to assess the situation before committing the Essex Scots. According to the log, however, brigade could have had no more than three minutes to decide.

Young wrote in the war diary, "the chief difficulty experienced by all four [battalions] was the devastating mortar and [artillery] fire which descended upon them immediately they reached their objectives."<sup>67</sup> While artillery and mortar fire inflicted numerous casualties, infantry of both

the South Sasks and the Essex Scots had to withdraw chiefly because, once they had lost their anti-tank weapons, they could not deal with the attacking enemy tanks. In the ops log almost every request for assistance mentions the presence of German armour.

Testimony gathered during the inquiry suggests that enemy armour was the prime reason for difficulty.<sup>68</sup> Numerous witnesses stated, and the court concluded, that enemy armour caused many losses. Company Sergeant-Major W.J. Foster of "C" Company of the Essex Scots testified, "During the hours of darkness 8 Tiger Tanks moved into the rear of our position with 4 on our right flank. These tanks continually harassed our position."<sup>69</sup> According to D.W. MacIntyre, commander of "B" Company, "at 1800 hours 20 July 44 my company occupied a forward position in support of the South Sask Regt. On our left I observed a number of Tiger tanks after they had been firing at us for some time." He added, "At 1930 hours I started to withdraw...a number of my men had to carry wounded which meant other men had to carry two or more weapons...I know all my weapons that were missing were, with the exception of one P.I.A.T., destroyed as a result of enemy action."<sup>70</sup> Clearly the forward units "did not drop their weapons and run."<sup>71</sup> Major T.E. Steele, "D" Company Commander testified that in the morning, "I observed 7 enemy tanks to my rear right. I suspected these tanks to be there during the night as we had been heavily fired upon...at approximately 1555 hours we were heavily counterattacked..."<sup>72</sup> Acting Company Sergeant-Major R.R. Case, commanding the Essex Carrier Platoon, testified that, "my own carrier was completely destroyed by an 88mm shell (the Tiger tank's main armament)."<sup>73</sup> Company Sergeant-Major J.W. Coldwell of the South

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**Major Fred Tilston, who would later be awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions in the Rhineland, spoke for the Regiment when he wrote in the Essex Scots' war diary after the battle:**

**It is not a pleasant picture to realize that so many of the [battalion] have been lost, especially when the action was not successful and many of the casualties could have been avoided by better planning...All of the rules of man management were either violated or ignored,...and plan, if known, was not given to the junior [officers] or troops.**

**This, of course, was an indictment of Young and support for MacDonald.**

Sasks' "A" Company testified that they were "prevented from digging in by enemy fire and six tanks."<sup>74</sup> Captain G.E. Colgate, in command of the South Sasks' Anti-Tank Platoon, testified, "Some of the guns were still moving into position when they were fired upon by enemy tanks. They tried to return fire but in doing so we lost 4 T.16 Carriers through tank fire."<sup>75</sup> Lieutenant S.M. Carter states, "We had been digging in for about 15 minutes when we were attacked by about half a dozen tanks... I saw the

tanks overrun "B" Company... (who) started to infiltrate back through us and then they were shelled by German 88mms... The two forward platoons in my company were overrun by tanks."<sup>76</sup>

Regarding any material deficiencies, the court ruled "that the deficiencies were caused by enemy action and could not have been avoided. There is no suggestion in the evidence that arms or equipment was deliberately discarded or thrown away, or that the unit or any

individual was neglectful and on the contrary it would appear that care had been taken that this should not happen.<sup>77</sup>

The court was slightly more critical of the South Sasks: "the excessive loss of stores was largely due to the manner in which the withdrawal was carried out. Whether or not the unit withdrew at too early a stage, is not a matter for this court to decide." The court added, "The losses were partly due to the counter-attack by tanks. The anti-tank guns all being destroyed before they even got into position, left the unit with PIATs only as anti-tank weapons. There was no armour support for the infantry."<sup>78</sup>

Even so, the brigade war diary claims that when Edmondson visited the brigadier at 1900 hours Young told him, "orders would be issued to the armour to cover him with protective fire."<sup>79</sup> Edmondson denied receiving any such assurance or support, and no such assistance ever materialized.

Young also denied that MacDonald tried to reorganize the men of "A" and "B" Companies and further claimed that he himself made good ammunition and weapon deficiencies with 2nd Division. As we have seen, however, MacDonald tried to re-equip his men, but brigade was unable to accommodate his request. The war diary claims that the brigade commander's "orders were made very clear to [MacDonald] but he seemed to have lost complete control."<sup>80</sup> However, MacDonald contended that the orders were *not* clear to him and were contradictory:

- i) That I should continue to hold my [forward position].
- ii) That I should organize an intermediate position with these remnants of A and B Coys.
- iii) That I could withdraw my [forward troops] to the intermediate position for reorganization and

later reoccupation of the forward position.

- iv) That I must not withdraw the [forward troops], but should continue to hold the intermediate position.

- v) That I should hold the intermediate position and so secure the [start-line] for the RHC attack at 1800 hours.<sup>81</sup>

Sixth Brigade's war diary further contends that at the end of 20 July, the Essex Scots were "in the process of being reformed to their original objective."<sup>82</sup> This statement implies that the Essex was not on its objective and that it needed re-forming. Neither implication is entirely accurate. The Essex Scots' forward companies were where the brigadier ordered them to be, and they held the line all night long.

## Conclusion

It is not difficult to understand why Young filed an adverse report against MacDonald. It was easier for him to claim that this battalion commander failed, not he himself. Reg Matthews, the South Sasks' acting CO, had been killed in action. The writer of the entry in 6th Brigade's war diary refers to MacDonald's excited state but wrote after it was clear that the battle was a failure. Any such references do not appear in the ops log or in the words of MacDonald's men. Edmondson's account of the confusion at 6th Brigade HQ suggests little to commend in its actions and decisions. The brigade's war diary repeatedly refers to the South Sasks' retreat as a "withdrawal to reorganize," but implies that the Essex withdrawal was "out of control," since "patrols were established to stop any further rearward movement of the Essex Scots," the only non-6th Brigade

battalion attacking that day.<sup>83</sup> Such a contention would sustain Young's complaint that MacDonald had lost control.

MacDonald acknowledged that the Black Watch had regained the so-called lost ground that evening. But he pointed out that the Black Watch did not secure any ground that the Essex had not already held the previous night. MacDonald claimed that had brigade offered any significant support, such as aggressive tank action, artillery fire, or a proper resupply, his unit could have held its forward positions as long as necessary. He added, "The area eventually reoccupied by the RHC was only that part of the front finally held by the Essex Scottish prior to the final withdrawal, and this reoccupation was accomplished with all the real artillery and close tank support which was denied to us."<sup>84</sup>

So the question remains: why did the Essex suffer a defeat that day? This article has outlined two possible reasons. First, as Brigadier Young claimed, Lieutenant-Colonel MacDonald had lost control of his battalion and become too nervous to exercise proper command and control. Or, second, failure was the result of a series of unavoidable circumstances, unattributable to one man alone. These include the confusion of battle; the dislocation caused by the withdrawal of the South Sasks directly through the Essex's consolidation area; the subsequent retreat of its own forward companies; and the lack of effective communication both to lower-level commanders and to brigade, coupled with incessant and well-supported enemy infantry and tank attacks. These factors combined to make exercise of command and control impossible for MacDonald who nevertheless continued to issue orders and attempted to resupply and reorganize his men as per orders from brigade HQ.

Brigade HQ's failure to provide armoured support was compounded by deteriorating weather, which halted the planned artillery and aerial support, and the early loss of the infantry's anti-tank weapons. Enemy infiltration into the forward positions also precluded substantial artillery assistance, which would have caused as many friendly as German casualties. The provision of adequate armoured support, which MacDonald repeatedly requested and which, by his account, met with Young's incredulity and annoyance, would most likely have reduced Essex casualties and greatly increased chances of success. One need look no further than the Black Watch, which launched its attack shortly after the Essex pulled out, with support from "the tanks of the 6th and 27th Armoured Regiments, and a formidable artillery programme."<sup>85</sup>

Most of the evidence suggests that Lieutenant-Colonel MacDonald could have done little more than he did to maintain control and to recapture any lost ground. All indications suggest that Young, through his plan of attack and especially through his mismanagement of both infantry and armour, bears the greater share of responsibility for the operation's failure. He was, therefore, careful in post-operation documents to infer that enemy artillery and mortar fire and MacDonald were the problems, not enemy armour. The Essex Scottish Regiment suffered a defeat on the slopes of Verrières Ridge because of inadequate support from Brigadier Young and the headquarters of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

## Notes

1. Essex Scottish War Diary [ESR WD], 3 December 1942, and 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operational Instructions, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].
2. Ibid., 28 May 1943.

3. Ibid., 10 June 1943.
4. Ibid., 14 March 1944.
5. Ibid., 14 January 1944.
6. Ibid., 4 July 1944.
7. Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.141.
8. Ibid., p.147.
9. HQ 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary [6th Bde WD], July 1944. Appendix 7, "Confirmatory Notes Comds Conference 200200B HRS," LAC.
10. Ibid.,
11. Ibid.
12. 6th CIB War Diary, 20 July 1944.
13. 2nd Canadian Infantry Division (2 CID) Intelligence Summary No. 4, 19 July 1944, para. 5.
14. Ibid.
15. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.150.
16. ESR WD, 22 July 1944
17. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944
18. ESR WD, 20 July 1944. The 6th Bde WD (20 July 1944) suggests that the attack opened simultaneously with the barrage at 1500 hours.
19. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
20. John S. Edmondson and R.D. Edmondson, "The Pawns of War: A Personal Account of the Attack on Verrières Ridge by the South Saskatchewan Regiment, 20 July 1944," *Canadian Military History* 14, 4 (Autumn 2005), p.53.
21. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
22. Ibid.
23. 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade Intelligence Log [6th Bde IL], Serial No.41.
24. South Saskatchewan Regiment War Diary [SSR WD], 20 July 1944, p.12.
25. Edmondson and Edmondson, p.54.
26. SSR WD, 20 July 1944, p.12.
27. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 150.
28. SSR WD, 20 July 1944, p. 12.
29. Ibid.
30. Edmondson and Edmondson, p.54.
31. 6th Bde IL, Serial No. 42.
32. Ibid., Serial No.50, 20 July 1944.
33. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
34. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.150.
35. SSR WD, 20 July 1944, p.12.
36. B.J.S. MacDonald Papers, Letter to Maj-Gen. Chas. Foulkes [date unknown], p.2, LAC MG 40 E480.
37. 6th Bde IL, Serial No. 48..
38. Ibid., Serial No. 47.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Edmondson and Edmondson, p. 57.
42. Court of Enquiry, 2 August 1944, MacDonald Papers.
43. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes, p.2.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p.5.
47. Ibid., p.4.
48. ESR WD, 21 July 1944.
49. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes, p. 2.
50. Ibid.
51. ESR WD, 21 July 1944.
52. 6th Bde WD, 21 July 1944.
53. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Lt.-Gen. Guy Simonds, 12 August 1944; and MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes.
54. Ibid., Petition of Other Ranks and Officers Affirming their Confidence in Lt.-Col. MacDonald.
55. Ibid., Ltr to Foulkes, p.2.
56. ESR WD, 22 July 1944.
57. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes, p. 3.
58. Ibid.
59. Edmondson and Edmondson, p. 49.
60. Ibid., p.50.
61. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944, "Confirmatory Notes Comds Conference 200200B HRS."
62. BJS MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Maj-Gen Chas Foulkes, LAC MG40 E480.
63. Edmondson and Edmondson, p.57.
64. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
65. C.P. Stacey, "Fables and Foibles: History and the Human Animal," in Terry Crowley, ed., *Clio's Craft: A Primer of Historical Methods* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd, 1988).
66. Ibid.
67. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
68. Court of Enquiry, p. 1.
69. Ibid., p.3.
70. Ibid., p.6.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., p.8.
75. Ibid., p.9.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., p.12
78. Ibid., p.13.
79. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
80. Ibid.
81. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes, p.1.
82. 6th Bde WD, 20 July 1944.
83. Ibid.
84. MacDonald Papers, Ltr to Foulkes, p. 3.
85. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: National Defence, 1960), p.176.

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Soldiers of the 58th Battalion on their way to the trenches, June 1917.

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